

Protecting the Public from Real Health Risks: The Benefits of Universal Immunization

Statement to the
Vaccines and Related
Biological Products
Advisory Committee
Food and Drug
Administration

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Statement of
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Recent experience instructs that our enormous success combating deadly and debilitating diseases with vaccines has created a new vulnerability in our society. A few decades ago, people feared polio, a disease that killed or paralyzed as many as half a million people a year. When polio vaccines became available, millions of people lined up to get it within hours of its approval. Children today know about polio only as a piece of history, not a fact of life. Measles kills about one million children a year around the world, but Americans feel secure because immunization has effectively wiped it out in the U.S.

Perhaps because we do not now live with the risk of getting diseases such as polio and measles, society now looks at risk through a different lens. Thus, when someone with academic credentials or a government body raises the *possibility* that there *might* be a very small risk of a serious adverse reaction to a vaccine, people react. Or overreact. Some do not wait for the studies to be conducted or the final judgements to be rendered. Many stop getting vaccinated.

Recent evidence comes from Wales, in the United Kingdom, where media coverage of unsubstantiated questions about the safety of measles, mumps and rubella vaccine triggered a 13% decline in the vaccination rate.¹ Closer to home, last summer's very public recommendations concerning thimerosal prompted 79% of hospitals to change their policies of universally administering hepatitis B vaccine to newborns of hepatitis B surface antigen negative mothers.² In both of these cases, concerns about risks that all available evidence tells us were either unfounded or extremely remote, respectively, led people and institutions to take actions with much *higher* and *proven* risk – leaving people unprotected from and vulnerable to diseases.

This is my core message to you today. You have a very big responsibility, working with an important federal agency to protect the public's health. And public health is best served by keeping risk issues in prudent perspective.

Infectious diseases pose a real threat to public health, and vaccines protect people from that threat. Universal immunization has cut the number of measles cases in the U.S. by 99.9%. We have eradicated polio and smallpox. On the other hand, lack of universal immunization for influenza leaves millions unprotected with the result that 30,000 Americans die from influenza and its complications each year.³

¹ "UK Newspaper Campaign Hit Vaccine Rates," Reuters Health, July 5, 2000

² CDC study as reported in *Infectious Disease News*, June 2000.

³ The Global Infectious Disease Threat and Its Implications for the United States, National Intelligence Council, January 2000, p. 5

Hepatitis B is 100 times more infectious than HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Over 1.2 million Americans are chronically infected with hepatitis B, a major cause of liver cancer and cirrhosis. Most do not know they are infected, so they unknowingly spread it to others, including their own family members, leading to a stealth epidemic. More than one billion doses of hepatitis B vaccine have been administered worldwide. All the available evidence indicates it is safe and effective. All of us should be combining our efforts to continue to assure the safety of this important vaccine and to raise immunization rates.

Bill Gates, whose name is synonymous with computing and the information revolution, says that vaccines are one of the two most important technologies developed in the 20th century because they have saved literally millions and millions of lives. He may have the century wrong but the concept is right. Vaccines are the cornerstone of sound public health policy. Let that fundamental fact inform our perspective.

The Albert B. Sabin is a nonprofit educational and research institute. Its mission is to save lives by stimulating development of new vaccines and increasing immunization rates. The Institute's headquarters is in New Canaan, Conn. For more information, visit www.sabin.org.